

Dirassat & Abhath
The Arabic Journal of Human
and Social Sciences



مجلة دراسات وأبحاث
المجلة العربية في العلوم الإنسانية
والاجتماعية

EISSN: 2253-0363
ISSN : 1112-9751

The Islamic approach to sustainable development

المقاربة الإسلامية للتنمية المستدامة

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تاريخ القبول : 2025/09/20

تاريخ الاستلام: 2025 /07/19

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the epistemological and Sharia-based foundations of the Islamic approach to sustainable development, presenting it as a comprehensive civilizational vision that integrates legal compliance with a Maqasid-oriented perspective. The findings demonstrate that Islam preceded all modern thought in addressing issues of sustainable development. As a sign of the completeness and precision of the Islamic worldview, it has laid down a set of principles and regulations that suffice humanity in managing life without undue hardship. As Allah says: ﴿وَكُلٌّ﴾ (Surat Al-Isrā', 17:12) Islamic thought has shown special care for environmental education and awareness, viewing them as vital elements of successful civilizational development—reflected in concepts such as *Istikhlāf* (stewardship) and *Imārah* (constructive inhabitation of the earth). The study further reveals that development in Islam is not confined to economic growth but encompasses social justice, protection of natural resources, and the safeguarding of human dignity for current and future generations. This approach emerges as a moral and practical alternative to prevailing materialist development paradigms.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Islamic Thought, Social Justice, Environment.

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف الأسس المعرفية والشرعية للمقاربة الإسلامية للتنمية المستدامة، باعتبارها رؤية حضارية متكاملة تجمع بين الامتثال الشرعي وتحقيق الرؤية المقاصدية. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن الإسلام سبق كل الفكر المتقدم في معالجة قضايا التنمية المستدامة، فمن تمام الفكر الإسلامي وكماله أن سنّ للحياة الشرعية قواعد وأنظمة فيها من الدقة والكمال ما تكفي الإنسان عن كل تدبير وعناء حيث قال الله ﷻ: ﴿وَكُلٌّ تَفْصِيلًا﴾ [سورة الإسراء: الآية 12]، إذ نجد أن الفكر الإسلامي قد أولى عناية خاصة بالثقافة والتنشئة البيئية، واعتبرها جزء من البناء الحضاري الناجح للمجتمع الإنساني؛ من خلال مفاهيم الاستخلاف والعمارة في الأرض. كما بيّن البحث أن التنمية في الإسلام لا تقتصر على النمو الاقتصادي، بل تشمل العدالة الاجتماعية، وحماية الموارد الطبيعية، وضمان كرامة الإنسان للأجيال الحالية والمستقبلية. وتبرز هذه المقاربة كبديل أخلاقي وواقعي للنماذج المادية المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنمية المستدامة، الفكر الإسلامي، العدالة الاجتماعية، البيئة.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development in the contemporary context represents one of the core pillars of global economic and social policies, due to the pressing environmental, climate, and social challenges that demand a shift in traditional development models and thinking patterns. In this context, the need arises for alternative approaches that are more balanced and inclusive—integrating economic, environmental, and social dimensions without compromising ethical and human values.

Among such approaches stands out the Islamic vision of sustainable development, a unique civilizational perspective that combines Sharia compliance with the objectives-based (Maqasid) outlook, offering a balanced and integrated framework between the human being, society, and the environment.

In Islamic thought, development is not merely limited to increasing production or achieving economic growth, but is intrinsically tied to the five higher objectives of Sharia (Maqasid al-Sharia). It seeks to realize the concepts of stewardship (Istikhlaf) and constructive inhabitation (Imarah) of the Earth, ensuring human dignity, sustainable use of natural resources, and fair distribution. This approach is grounded in Qur’anic values and central concepts such as Mizan (balance), Istikhlaf (trusteeship), *Rushd* (righteous guidance), and Tazkiyah (purification), forming an integrated system that governs the relationship between individuals and resources, and between development and the environment.

Accordingly, this research will explore the epistemological and Sharia foundations of the Islamic approach to sustainable development, highlighting its integration with Islamic economics. It will also emphasize its ethical and functional specificity, and its capacity to offer a balanced developmental alternative that aligns with contemporary challenges. This research is structured into three main sections:

1. The concept of sustainable development
2. The general framework of the emergence and evolution of the concept.
3. The Islamic approach to sustainable development.
4. The Islamic Perspective on Sustainability

1. The concept of Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development has emerged in recent years as one of the most prominent and widely discussed concepts, due to its profound connection to the future of humanity and the planet's climate. It is widely regarded as a crucial pathway—perhaps the last viable one—for securing the long-term well-being of both people and the Earth. The diversity of perspectives on sustainable development stems from differing views regarding its scope, dimensions, and implementation.

Defined in multiple ways, sustainable development has become a central paradigm in global policy and academic discourse, aiming to harmonize three key pillars:

economic progress, social inclusion, and environmental preservation. It was first formally defined by the Brundtland Commission, in its 1987 report *Our Common Future*, published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹ This definition emphasizes intergenerational equity and the responsible use of resources.

Building on this foundation, the United Nations expanded the concept to encompass a holistic vision that integrates environmental protection, economic viability, and social equity—essential components for ensuring the well-being of both present and future generations.² collectively, these definitions underscore the multidimensional nature of sustainability and the urgent need for inclusive, integrated, and forward-looking strategies. Based on the aforementioned definitions, sustainable development can be defined as a set of balanced and adaptive practices aimed at the rational and optimal utilization and preservation of material and environmental resources in a manner that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the rights and requirements of future generations.

2. The Historical Genesis and Evolution of the Concept of Sustainable Development:

With the evolution of development thinking and the growing global awareness of the gravity of environmental challenges threatening the stability of life on Earth, a reassessment of the relationship between humanity and nature has become

increasingly necessary. This shift has been accompanied by mounting calls for the adoption of green economic values and principles. Given the failure of earlier development models to integrate the environmental dimension—focusing predominantly on economic and social aspects—it has become imperative to seek a new approach that addresses ecological crises and restores environmental balance.

International research efforts culminated in the emergence of an alternative development paradigm—**sustainable development**—, which takes into account both the capacities and limitations of ecosystems. This model is grounded in the principle that the present must not consume the future. The following section traces the key historical milestones in the evolution of this concept and outlines its core objectives.

2.1 The Preliminary Phase of the Concept's Emergence (Pre-1972):

A historical review of the roots of the sustainable development approach reveals that its principles have existed since the dawn of human civilization. As early as the Zhou Dynasty in China (1100–771 BCE), emperors recognized the necessity of using mountains, forests, and rivers wisely, in accordance with the laws of nature, rather than overexploiting them. Various laws and measures were enacted to protect environmental resources and curb environmental degradation—such as regulating agriculture and prohibiting deforestation—in ancient civilizations including those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome.³

Islam also gave great importance to development, assigning it a deeper meaning known as *‘Imarah* (stewardship and

cultivation of the Earth). This is clearly reflected in the Qur'anic verse:

﴿هُوَ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ وَاسْتَعْمَرَكُمْ فِيهَا﴾.

"It is He who has produced you from the earth and settled you therein" (Surah Hud, Ayah-61). In Islam, development is a divine mandate to cultivate and sustain the Earth. It aims to achieve environmental balance and elevate the civilizational standard of life. Moreover, it is grounded in core theological principles related to monotheism (*Tawhid*), divine lordship (*Rububiyyah*), and the concept of trusteeship (*Istikhlaf*). The Islamic perspective on sustainable development will be addressed in the following section.

The term "sustainability" was first explicitly used in a systematic manner in 1713 in *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* (Forestry and Economics), a study by Hans Carl von Carlowitz, which addressed the issue of sustainable forest management.⁴

Following World War II, and as many developing countries achieved political independence—soon followed by aspirations for economic independence—the deteriorating economic conditions in these nations created an urgent need for rapid economic transformation. As a result, the first Development Decade during the 1960s focused almost exclusively on economic growth, and thus came to be known as the era of economic development.

2.2 The Phase of Emergence and Conceptual Development (1972–1987):

This phase, spanning from 1972 to 1987, was marked by continued individual and collective efforts by researchers, thinkers, and environmental organizations calling for urgent action to curb environmental

pollution—especially in the aftermath of the Great Smog of London in 1952, which claimed the lives of over 4,000 people within four days⁵. During this period, the concept of development began to acquire additional social, political, and cultural dimensions alongside its traditional economic focus.

Several key initiatives and milestones contributed to shaping and institutionalizing the concept of sustainable development during this phase:

a) In 1972, the United Nations convened the first global environmental summit in Stockholm, Sweden, known as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. This event is considered a symbolic starting point for the concept of sustainable development. The conference urged all nations to promote policies that integrate human societal advancement with responsible use of economic resources and the preservation of ecological systems.⁶

That same year, the Club of Rome released a groundbreaking report titled *The Limits to Growth*, a modern revival of Malthusian thinking. This publication became a turning point in the development debate, raising critical and controversial questions about the consequences of accelerated economic growth and rapid population increase—particularly in terms of pollution and the depletion of natural resources. One of the report's major impacts was to draw attention to the importance of environmental management and to sound the alarm on the anticipated ecological imbalances projected for the early 21st century.

b) In October 1982, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the World Charter for Nature, which emphasized that

all national development planning should incorporate strategies for nature conservation and the pursuit of sustainable development, grounded in international cooperation and mutual respect between people and natural resources.⁷

c) The phase culminated in 1987 with the release of the seminal report *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Also known as, the Brundtland Report—named after the Commission’s chair, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland—the document introduced and systematically defined the term sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The report firmly positioned sustainable development at the heart of international development discourse and policymaking. Due to its global significance, the report was translated into more than 24 languages.⁸ To this day, its definition of sustainable development remains the most widely cited and authoritative.

2.3 The Phase of Expansion and Dissemination (1987–2012):

The concept of sustainable development significantly expanded between 1987 and 2012, fuelled by a series of high-level summits and international conferences.

a) **The First Earth Summit (Rio 1992) Foundations of Global Environmental Governance.** Attended by representatives from over 175 countries, this summit laid the foundational principles for the global integration of sustainable development. The international community adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and

Development and the comprehensive action plan known as Agenda 21.

The Rio Declaration articulated 27 principles, emphasizing equitable partnerships and development through cooperation among nations, sectors, and individuals. Principle 7, in particular, stressed the notion of “**common but differentiated responsibilities**”, recognizing the varying capacities and historical responsibilities of nations⁹. *Agenda 21*, in turn, consisted of 40 chapters outlining actions in four key areas: the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, the conservation and management of natural resources, the role of major groups, and mechanisms of implementation.

The Rio Summit also resulted in the creation of three major global environmental governance mechanisms:

- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD),
- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and
- The Forest Principles, a non-legally binding statement on sustainable forest management.

Politically, the Rio Summit was highly successful, garnering unprecedented international participation. It also reaffirmed the centrality of social equity, helping to formally establish the three foundational pillars of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.¹⁰

b) **On 11 December 1997**, the third session of the Conference of the Parties (COP3) to the UNFCCC was held in Kyoto, Japan, resulting in the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol. Entering into force in 2005¹¹, the

protocol marked a significant evolution in global climate governance. Unlike the 1992 convention, the protocol imposed legally binding commitments on industrialized countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 5% below 1990 levels during the first commitment period (2008–2012).¹² Implementation relied on three market-based mechanisms: Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), Joint Implementation (JI), and Emissions Trading. A second commitment period was later established, spanning 2013 to 2020.

c) At the dawn of the new millennium, the Millennium Summit was held in September 2000 at the United Nations headquarters in New York, with the participation of over 189 countries and 23 international organizations. The summit presented a symbolic opportunity to introduce new strategies and global development solutions for the 21st century. It reaffirmed the international community's commitment to strengthening partnerships with governments and civil society to ensure no one is left behind. The summit also adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—a framework comprising 8 goals, 21 targets, and 60 indicators to guide international cooperation and national development strategies over the next 15 years. These goals included¹³:

- Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.
- Achieving universal primary education.
- Promoting gender equality and empowering women.
- Reducing child mortality.
- Improving maternal health.
- Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.
- Ensuring environmental sustainability.

- Developing a global partnership for development.

2.4 The Phase of Embracing the Green Economy (2012 – Present):

This phase is characterized by the emergence of the green economy concept and the adoption of global goals for sustainable development. Among its most notable milestones are the following:

a) In June 2012, two decades after the first Earth Summit and amid increasing tensions among economic, social, and environmental priorities, the Third Earth Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Brazil under the theme “*The Future We Want*”, also known as Rio+20. The summit emphasized that the green economy represents the optimal alternative for resolving conflicts between development and environmental preservation¹⁴. It promoted innovative guiding principles and the formulation of global cooperative strategies for financing sustainable development efforts. Rio+20 drew the attention of thousands within and beyond the United Nations system, resulting in the announcement of more than 700 voluntary commitments and the formation of new partnerships to advance sustainable development. The summit also marked an expansion of the sustainable development paradigm from three pillars—economic, social, and environmental—to include a fourth dimension: governance¹⁵.

b) In September 2015, more than 190 heads of state and government participated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit at UN Headquarters in New York. The summit aimed to assess progress on the Millennium Development Goals and to launch a new and expanded agenda for global development. It adopted the 2030

Agenda for Sustainable Development under the title “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, which comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 169 targets, and 230 indicators addressing the dimensions of global sustainable development. These goals, which came into effect in January 2016 as a replacement for the Millennium Development Goals, are as follows¹⁶:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
8. Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth; full and productive employment; and decent work for all.
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems; sustainably manage forests; combat desertification; halt and reverse land degradation; and halt biodiversity loss.
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development; provide access to justice for all; and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

These goals and targets are **integrated and indivisible**, aiming to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development. They are to be implemented through to the year **2030**. While **developed countries** tend to prioritize climate action, **developing nations** focus more on urgent developmental challenges.

c) In November 2023, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) was held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. This international meeting added to a series of prior climate summits reflecting global willingness to confront climate change and environmental degradation. COP28 was particularly significant as it represented the first global stocktake of progress since the Paris Agreement of 2015, which aimed to limit global warming to below 2°C, with

efforts to restrict the increase to 1.5°C over the next three decades.

However, the outcomes and assessments of the summit revealed numerous and alarming challenges. Of the approximately 140 assessable targets, half were found to be moderately or severely off-track. Moreover, more than 30% of the targets had seen no progress, and, in some cases, had even regressed below 2015 baseline levels. These findings are especially concerning in the context of the global economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic, which was expected to accelerate green transitions and reinforce sustainability commitments. This global stocktake underscores the urgent need to intensify efforts and to adopt more effective approaches to keep the SDGs on track and ensure progress toward a sustainable future for all.

3. The Conceptual Foundations of Sustainable Development in Islamic Thought:

Human life in Islam is founded upon a set of integrated principles derived from the core foundations of Islamic Sharia, which serve as the basis for the structure of the Islamic economic system. This system ultimately aims to realize the welfare of humanity in both their worldly and spiritual affairs. Although the term "sustainable development" is relatively recent and modern, a careful and in-depth exploration of the fundamental teachings and literature of Islam reveals that the essence of this concept has been deeply rooted in Islamic thought for over fourteen centuries—articulated through various synonymous expressions such as *‘imārah* (construction/development) and *istikhlāf* (vicegerency/stewardship).

3.1 Islamic Ethical and Jurisprudential Concepts Supporting Sustainability:

Despite the attention given by conventional secular systems to the notion of sustainable development, it has largely remained confined to material concerns—focused on fulfilling physical needs and maximizing profitability—while neglecting the spiritual dimension. Yet, human beings are composed of both body and soul, and the balance between the two is the essence of a good and meaningful life.

In contrast, the concept of sustainable development in Islam is deeper and more comprehensive. It transcends the materialistic outlook promoted by the 21st-century agenda stemming from the Rio Earth Summit. The Islamic holistic perspective requires that sustainable development not occur in isolation from religious and ethical boundaries. These boundaries serve as safeguards against transgressions that could undermine the very sustainability of development.

At the same time, Islam's integrated view of sustainable development includes meeting both the present and future needs of humanity—material and spiritual alike—ensuring that every individual, in every era and location, has a rightful share in moral, cultural, social, and environmental development. This distinguishes the Islamic vision of sustainable development from other systems and philosophies, as it emphasizes a balance and moderation that align with the divine nature of human creation.

In this vision, human beings are neither rivals to nature nor tyrants over it. Rather, they are its stewards (*amānah*), entrusted to treat it with care and compassion, drawing

from it only what is necessary for themselves and their dependents, without extravagance or negligence. As Allah says: ﴿وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ﴾¹⁵ “Eat and drink, but do not be excessive. Indeed, He does not like those who commit excess.” [Sūrat al-A‘rāf: 31]. Furthermore, sustainable development in Islam is a form of gratitude (*shukr*) toward the Creator for His blessings. Labor and contribution to the earth are seen as manifestations of thankfulness, as expressed in the verse:

﴿يَعْمَلُونَ لَهُ مَا يَشَاءُ مِنْ مَحْرِبٍ وَتَمَثِيلٍ وَجِفَانٍ كَالْجَوَابِ وَقُدُورٍ رَاسِيَّتٍ إِعْمَلُوا آلَ دَاوُدَ شُكْرًا وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنْ عِبَادِيَ الشَّاكِرِينَ﴾

“They made for him whatever he desired of sanctuaries, statues, large basins like reservoirs, and heavy cooking pots. ‘Work, O family of David, in gratitude.’ And few of My servants are grateful.” [Sūrat Saba’: 13]. Accordingly, sustainable development from an Islamic perspective can be defined as a comprehensive and balanced process rooted in freedom, justice, and social solidarity. It is guided by the human being’s role as a vicegerent (*khalīfah*) and builder (*mu‘ammir*) of the Earth, aiming to bring about benefit and prevent harm. This is achieved through the optimal and permissible use of material and human resources to elevate the spiritual, moral, and civilizational well-being of humankind—while safeguarding the ecological system and ensuring the rights of future generations.

3.2 Key Features of Sustainable Development in Islamic Thought:

Sustainable development in Islam encompasses several fundamental characteristics, chief among them are:

a) Comprehensiveness: Islam, in its approach to sustainable development, does not separate the material from the spiritual, nor the worldly from the Hereafter. Any human activity, as long as it is lawful and carried out with sincere intention toward Allah, is considered a righteous deed. As Allah

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِي﴾

states: “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.” [Sūrat adh-Dhāriyāt: 56]. Issues of development cannot be addressed apart from doctrinal orientations. It is unreasonable, for instance, to promote development that guarantees freedom of expression but fails to ensure food security for the poor—as seen in capitalist systems—or one that ensures bread for the needy but denies freedom of thought and initiative—as in socialist systems¹⁶. The Islamic principle of comprehensiveness ensures holistic social justice by meeting essential material needs (such as food, clothing, housing, healthcare, leisure, and employment), as well as spiritual needs (such as freedom of expression and the practice of religious rituals). Thus, the concept of sustainable development in Islam is intimately linked to faith-based foundations.

b) Balance: Islam not only commands work and striving upon the earth, but also emphasizes balance and moderation in the distribution of work and its outcomes. Allah, Glorified and Exalted be He, says:

﴿وَابْتَغِ فِيمَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ وَلَا تَنْسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا وَأَحْسِنَ كَمَا أَحْسَنَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ وَلَا تَبْغِ الْفُسَادَ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُفْسِدِينَ﴾

“But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and [yet], do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done good to you.

And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters.” [Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ: 77]. Sustainable development in Islam calls for utilizing all available material and human resources in a way that achieves a developmental balance between material, spiritual, moral, and doctrinal aspects—without one overpowering the others. One of its key features is precisely this equilibrium: it does not prioritize industry over agriculture, rural over urban development, consumer production over investment production, capital-intensive technology over labor-intensive strategies, or economic gains over social, environmental, and cultural-religious concerns. Likewise, it does not prioritize the needs of the present generation at the expense of future generations, nor does it assign sole responsibility to the government while ignoring the private sector. Instead, it is rooted in *wasatiyyah* (moderation) when making all decisions, guided by the needs of the Muslim society.

c) Justice: Islamic law was revealed to establish justice among people. As Allah declares: ﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ وَإِيتَاءِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَيَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَالْبَغْيِ يَعِظُكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ﴾ *“Indeed, Allah commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives and forbids immorality, wrongdoing, and transgression. He admonishes you so that you may be mindful.”* [Sūrat an-Nahl: 90]. From the Islamic perspective, sustainable development is founded upon justice, freedom, equality, and social solidarity¹⁷. It ensures that each individual in society receives their fair share according to their needs—except in exceptional circumstances. It also ensures distributive justice through

mechanisms that uphold the rights of both the wealthy and the poor. These include zakat, kharāj, ‘ushr, and jizyah—ensuring that no individual suffers hunger without being properly cared for.

d) Realism: Sustainable development in Islam is marked by a deep sense of realism. The comprehensive nature of the Islamic worldview is aligned with the actual conditions and needs of society. It examines development challenges from all dimensions and proposes solutions that are practical and applicable in daily life. This realism is coupled with idealism, since Islamic teachings originate from the Creator, who knows the conditions and capabilities of humankind. As stated in the Qur’an:

﴿هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنْتُمْ أَجْنَةٌ فِي بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ فَلَا تُزَكُّوْا أَنْفُسَكُمْ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اتَّقَىٰ﴾

An example of this realism is how Islam addresses poverty and wealth inequality. Allah says: ﴿وَالَّذِينَ فِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ مَّعْلُومٌ (24)﴾

﴿وَالَّذِينَ فِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ مَّعْلُومٌ﴾ *“And those in whose wealth there is a recognized right—for the beggar and the deprived.”* (Sūrat al-Ma‘ārij, 24–25). This verse affirms that the poor have a well-defined right in the wealth of the rich through obligatory mechanisms like zakat and through encouraged charitable acts like waqf (endowment) and voluntary giving, ensuring a cohesive and supportive Islamic society.

e) Responsibility: Responsibility is a foundational pillar of sustainable development in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stated: **“Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock¹⁸.”** This hadith reflects the Islamic emphasis on accountability—individuals are responsible for their actions before Allah, within their personal, social,

and professional domains. Responsibility in Islam transcends the individual to include collective responsibility at the societal and state levels. A vivid historical example is the declaration by Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who said: "By Allah, if I remain alive, I will ensure that the widows of Iraq will not need to depend on anyone after me."¹⁹ This illustrates the Islamic model of a welfare state that upholds the dignity of all citizens, regardless of religion or social status.

f) Sufficiency: Unlike conventional economic systems that assume resource scarcity relative to unlimited human wants, Islamic economic thought maintains that Allah has provided sufficient resources to meet human needs. The Qur'an declares:

﴿وَعَايَتِكُمْ مِّن كُلِّ مَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُ وَإِن تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ لَا تَحْصُوهَا إِنَّ الْإِنسَانَ لَظَلُومٌ كَفَّارٌ﴾

"And He gave you of all you asked of Him. And if you should count the favor of Allah, you could not enumerate them. Indeed, humankind is [generally] most unjust and ungrateful." (Sūrat Ibrāhīm,:34) The real issue lies in human misbehavior, inefficiencies in production, and unjust distribution²⁰. Hence, Islamic development emphasizes enhancing production and ensuring fair distribution to eliminate poverty, not merely through charity, but by fulfilling communal obligations.

g) Human Dignit: In Islam, humans are honored creations of God as expressed in the Qur'an: ﴿أَلَمْ تَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَأَسْبَغَ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَةً ظَهْرَةً وَبَاطِنَةً﴾.

"Do you not see that Allah has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, and amply bestowed upon you His blessings, both visible and hidden"

[Sūrat Luqmān:20]

Islamic sustainable development aims to uphold this dignity by freeing humans from exploitation and affirming their spiritual

mission on earth. Human beings are not mere consumers of material goods, but are stewards (khulafā') of Allah on earth. From this perspective, sustainable development is a human right and a divine mandate. Imam al-Ghazālī emphasized this when he said: *"The objective of Shari'ah concerning creation is to preserve five necessities: religion, life, intellect, progeny, and wealth."*²¹

h) Continuity: Sustainable development in Islam is intergenerational. It is a continuous endeavor that addresses the challenges of each time and place—poverty, hunger, underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and unemployment—while aiming for long-term progress and civilization-building. It is not a temporary project but a moral and strategic obligation sustained over time²².

3.3 The Dimensions of Sustainable Development from an Islamic Economic Perspective:

Unlike secular systems, which are typically based on a dual relationship—between humans and nature, and between humans and one another—sustainable development from an Islamic perspective is rooted in a triadic relationship. This triad distinguishes the human being as a central axis in achieving sustainable development. In Islam, development originates from within the human being, rather than being merely focused on expanding economic resources to meet material needs. The three foundational relationships are:

a) The relationship between the human and the Creator: This reflects the spiritual and devotional dimension. It affirms that the connection between humans and their Lord

cannot be reduced to a purely materialistic interaction.

b) The relationship between the human and nature: This represents the environmental dimension, which remains intrinsically linked to faith. While humans rely on nature to fulfill their needs and desires, nature in turn depends on human stewardship to protect its resources and maintain ecological balance. Historically, Islamic economic development was significantly based on agricultural advancement and trade. Particular emphasis was placed on agriculture, which played a central role in economic prosperity—reflected in increased revenues from land taxes (kharāj) due to improved agricultural techniques and expanded fertile lands resulting from Islamic conquests.

c) The relationship between human beings: This represents the ethical and interpersonal dimension. Since no individual can fulfill all their needs independently, mutual cooperation becomes essential. Every person complements others, making production a social process that benefits both the individual and the community. This relationship underpins social cohesion and promotes social justice.

3.4 The Goals of Sustainable Development from an Islamic Perspective:

From an Islamic perspective, sustainable development is guided by a set of fundamental goals, the most significant of which include the following:

- Placing human well-being at the center of the development process by ensuring the fulfillment of basic needs in a manner that upholds

human dignity—particularly for the poor and marginalized;

- Ensuring the rights of both present and future generations through the rational and just utilization of natural resources;
- Preserving the environment and the natural surroundings in all their dimensions and contents;
- Promoting public awareness of environmental challenges and cultivating a strong sense of responsibility toward them, while encouraging active participation in identifying appropriate solutions through involvement in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of sustainable development programs and projects²⁴;
- Guaranteeing the right of all individuals to participate in and benefit from development, by involving diverse members of society in decision-making processes, in a manner that respects and reflects the cultural, religious, and civilizational specificities of each community.

3.5 Islamic Mechanisms and Strategic Approaches to Advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

The solutions proposed by those concerned with sustainable development and environmental activists—often reflected in international agreements—typically require high costs and significant sacrifices from surplus-wealth holders, particularly in industrialized developed countries, in favor of poorer nations. However, in reality, these stakeholders frequently evade their

obligations under such agreements, as they are perceived to conflict with their own interests, with little regard for the welfare of vulnerable societies or for prioritizing environmental preservation.

This situation calls for alternative mechanisms to achieve sustainable development, especially in terms of financing. Here, Islamic economic instruments emerge as a viable alternative, offering a model of financing that aligns with the interests of both individuals and society. These mechanisms possess distinctive characteristics that support sustainable development goals without conflicting with the well-being of humanity. Among the most prominent mechanisms are:

a) Islamic Banking and Finance

Islamic banking and finance demonstrate a strong capacity to mobilize available resources, particularly through the principle of *mushārah* (partnership), which enhances economic stability and contributes directly to sustainable development. This participatory model encourages shared decision-making and accountability, motivating both surplus and deficit economic agents to engage actively in productive activities and community development—an essential aim of sustainable development.

Moreover, Islamic finance offers a wide range of instruments suitable for funding high-cost projects, including those related to sustainability. These include *muḍārah* (profit-sharing), *salām* (advance payment contracts), *muzārah* (agricultural partnerships), *istisnāʿ* (manufacturing finance), and *mughārasa* (tree planting partnerships), all of which can effectively

support long-term, capital-intensive development initiatives.

b) Zakāt and Waqf Institutions

Zakāt (obligatory almsgiving) and *waqf* (charitable endowment) represent vital sources of funding widely used by many Arab and Islamic countries to address financial deficits. Their proceeds are often allocated to a variety of projects, including both social ventures—such as building mosques, schools, educational centers, and healthcare facilities—and economic infrastructure projects, including agriculture, irrigation systems, road construction, clean water provision, housing, and light industries²⁵.

Historically, *zakāt* and *waqf* have played a central role in the development of Islamic civilization. These institutions are instrumental in promoting social justice and ensuring equitable distribution and redistribution of wealth. By channeling, wealth from the affluent to the needy, *zakāt* serves as a mechanism to reduce economic inequality and prevent the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. This in turn fosters social and economic balance, mitigates social ills, reduces corruption and crime, and contributes to building a resilient society based on solidarity and mutual support—core objectives of sustainable development as envisioned within the Islamic framework.

4. CONCLUSION

While some perceive sustainable development as a modern term coined by the United Nations to chart a global roadmap for environmental, social, and economic progress, a careful reading of select

Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions reveals that Islam was, in fact, a pioneer in laying down the foundational values and principles for achieving sustainable development. The Islamic tradition emphasizes social responsibility, the preservation and protection of the environment, and the maintenance of ecological balance.

Islam calls for work and the pursuit of holistic, sustainable development in all its dimensions. It encourages the protection and compassionate treatment of all living beings, including safeguarding human beings from the harm of their own actions and from the injustice of others. Furthermore, Islam affirms the legitimate use of natural resources and Earth's endowments, but within a framework of moderation—avoiding both excess and negligence.

Islam does not merely outline rewards for those who act righteously toward the environment and punishments for those who abuse it; rather, it elevates environmental ethics to a noble standard of behavior that every Muslim is obligated to uphold, in accordance with divine commands. While Islamic thought is deeply committed to securing the welfare of the present generation, it also maintains a clear focus on the well-being of future generations. Thus, sustainable development becomes not just an abstract ideal, but a lived and enduring reality—where each generation serves as a vital link in a continuous human chain, working collectively across time for the benefit of those who follow.

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